



Victoria 3086
Australia

Ernest Raetz
T +61 3 9479 2315
F +61 3 9479 1387
E e.raetz@latrobe.edu.au
W www.latrobe.edu.au

Thursday, 2 April 2009

Key role for La Trobe in new national autism children's centre program

La Trobe University has been chosen by the Federal Government as Victorian service provider under its new national Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centres (ASELCC) program.

In partnership with the Royal Children's Hospital, the University will receive \$4 million over four years to develop an Autism Specific Early Learning and Care Centre, which will be co-located with the Community Children's Centre on the University's main Melbourne campus at Bundoora.

The new Centre will provide 20 full-time places for children with an Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The funds will be used to add a new wing, The Margot Prior Wing, to the existing building*.

It will begin operating in June next year, and will be the first in the State to provide care and early intervention programs for children with an ASD as part of a regular child care facility.

The new places will help reduce the overload on other early intervention services and make a meaningful difference to the lives of affected children and their families, particularly in the North and West of Melbourne.

Plans for the Centre were unveiled at La Trobe University today – on World Autism Day – by Minister for Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, Ms Jenny Macklin and Parliamentary Secretary for Disability and Children's Services, Mr Bill Shorten.

Two other centres, one in NSW and one in SA, were also announced at today's launch. Minister Macklin said the new centres would draw together child care centres, universities and hospitals to develop best practice models of learning and intervention.

'The collaborative approach gives us an unprecedented opportunity to develop evidence based models, collect significant data and make a major contribution to understanding autism,' Ms Macklin said.

La Trobe University Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Johnson welcomed the Federal Government's support and acknowledged a contribution of \$500,000 by the Victorian Government towards construction costs.

'The University is strongly committed to the Government's agenda of increased access and participation by people from all levels of society.

'We are also indebted to the generosity of Mrs Olga Tennison through whose major financial contribution the University's Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre was established in 2008, enabling expansion of this important field of research and increasing support for children and families affected by Autism Spectrum Disorders.'

Director of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC), Associate Professor Cheryl Dissanayake, said the new facility will help with family-centred early intervention as well as day care for children of working families and those in need of respite.

It will also provide professional development and education for future clinicians and workers in the field of autism and serve as a community resource for children with autism, their families and carers.

Dr Dissanayake said that with the increase in diagnoses of autism, where about one in 160 children are affected, waiting lists of up to two years for access to early intervention are not uncommon.

'This state of affairs is particularly sad given our knowledge that the earlier the intervention, the better the developmental outcomes for children.'

Researchers and clinicians from La Trobe University and the Royal Children's Hospital will work with Centre staff to develop early learning programs based on current research.

- The Government today also announced another arm of its autism package – a nation-wide 'Early Days Workshop Program' for parents and carers of newly diagnosed children aged 0-6 years.

La Trobe University is involved in this initiative with researchers at the OTARC developing these workshops in collaboration with the Parenting Research Centre and other partners.

For further information please contact Dr Dissanayake, tel: 9479 2497, email: c.dissanayake@latrobe.edu or see <http://www.latrobe.edu.au/otarc/>

* Professor Prior, former Director of Psychology at the Royal Children's Hospital and Professor of Clinical Psychology at La Trobe University, is a leading specialist in family and child development. She is at the University of Melbourne and has an Adjunct Professorship at La Trobe. Professor Prior is also Chair of the Advisory Committee of the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre.